(LEFT to right) Muslims carry out a post-fireworks clean-up on New Year's morning in the Neukoelln district of Berlin, Germany; firefighters work at the site of a fire that broke out in the tower of the Vondelkerk church in Amsterdam; and, the church tower is seen ablaze on New Year's Eve.—Reuters/AFP

Kim Jong Un hails troops fighting in 'alien land'

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un hailed troops fighting in an "alien land" in a New Year message to soldiers, state media reported Thursday, in which he underscored Pyongyang's alliance with Russia.

Without mentioning Ukraine, Kim addressed personnel in what state-run *Korean Central News Agency* described as "overseas operations units", congratulating their "heroic" defence of the nation's honour and instructing them to "be brave".

"As the whole country is enveloped in a festive atmosphere of greeting the new year, I all the more miss you, who are fighting bravely on the battlefields in the alien land even at this moment, true to the order of your homeland. Behind you are Pyongyang and Moscow," he said.

North Korea has sent thousands of troops to support Russia's nearly four-year invasion of Ukraine, according to Western intelligence agencies.

At least 600 have died and thousands more have sustained injuries, according to South Korean estimates.—AFP

Fire ravages Amsterdam church during 'unsettled' New Year

Two youths killed in Germany; Belgian police make scores of arrests as officers in Brussels, Antwerp targeted with fireworks

THE HAGUE: A huge inferno gutted a 19th century Amsterdam church Thursday, as the Netherlands endured an unsettled New Year's Eve with two dead from fireworks and "unprecedented" violence against police.

The blaze broke out in the early hours at the Vondelkerk, a tourist attraction that has overlooked one of the city's top parks since 1872.

The 50-metre-high (164-foot) tower collapsed and the roof was badly damaged but the structure was expected to remain intact, Amsterdam authorities said.

The cause of the blaze was not immediately clear.

The head of the Dutch Police Union, Nine Kooiman, reported an "unprecedented amount of violence against police and emergency services" over New Year's Eve.

She said she herself had been pelted three times by fireworks and other explosives as she worked a shift in Amsterdam.

Shortly after midnight, authorities released a rare country-wide alert on mobile phones warning people not to call overwhelmed emergency services unless lives were at risk.

Reports of attacks against police and firefighters were widespread across the country. In the southern city of Breda, people threw petrol bombs at police.

Two people, a 17-year-old boy and a 38-year-old man, were killed in fireworks accidents. Three others were seriously injured.

The eye hospital in Rotterdam said it had treated 14 patients, including 10 minors, for eye injuries. Two received surgery.

It was the last year before an expected ban on unofficial fireworks, so the Dutch bought them in massive quantities.

According to the Dutch Pyrotechnics Association, revellers splashed out a record 129 million euros ($151 million) on fireworks.

Some areas had been designated firework-free zones, but this appeared to have little effect.

An AFP journalist in such a zone in The Hague reported loud bangs until around 3am.

In Belgium, meanwhile, police made scores of arrests as officers in both Brussels and Antwerp were targeted with fireworks - with a New Year's ban on their use failing to prevent chaotic scenes in both major cities.

Police used tear gas and arrested more than 100 people in the port city of Antwerp, where minors as young as 10 or 11 targeted officers and emergency services with fireworks and stones, setting fire to bikes, cars and trash cans, a spokesperson told AFP.

Authorities confiscated a number of "very dangerous" professional grade fireworks, the spokesperson said. A 12-year-old child was seriously injured in a fireworks incident in the northern city.

Likewise in the capital Brussels, police said they were "repeatedly" targeted with fireworks, making some 70 arrests overnight.

In Germany, two 18-year-olds died in the western city of Bielefeld when they set off home-made fireworks that produced "deadly facial injuries," local police said in a statement.—AFP

Near record number of small boat migrants reached UK in 2025

LONDON: The second-highest annual number of migrants arrived on UK shores in small boats since records were started in 2018, the government was to confirm Thursday.

The tally comes as Brexit firebrand Nigel Farage's anti-immigration party Reform UK surges in popularity ahead of bellwether local elections in May.

With Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer increasingly under pressure over the thorny issue, his interior minister Shabana Mahmood has proposed a drastic reduction in protections for refugees and the ending of automatic benefits for asylum seekers.

Home Office data as of midday on Wednesday showed a total of 41,472 migrants landed on England's southern coast in 2025 after making the perilous Channel crossing from northern France.

A record number of 45,774 arrivals was recorded in 2022 under the last Conservative government.

The Home Office is due to confirm the final figure for 2025 later on Thursday.

Former Tory prime minister Rishi Sunak vowed to "stop the boats" when he was in power.

Ousted by Starmer in July 2024, he later said he regretted the slogan because it was too "stark" and "binary" and lacked sufficient context "for exactly how challenging" the goal was.

Adopting his own "smash the gangs" slogan, Starmer pledged to tackle the problem by dismantling the people smuggling networks running the crossings but has so far had no more success than his predecessor.

Reform has led Starmer's Labour Party by double-digit margins in opinion polls for most of 2025.

In a New Year message, Farage predicted that if Reform got things "right" at the forthcoming local elections "we will go on and win the general election" due in 2029 at the latest.—AFP

Mexico arrests alleged drug cartel leader wanted by US

MEXICO CITY: An alleged leader of the notorious Sinaloa cartel wanted by the United States has been arrested in Mexico on drug and terrorism charges, Mexican government sources said Wednesday.

Pedro Inzunza Noriega was accused by the United States in May of trafficking large amounts of fentanyl, cocaine and heroin into the country as the second-in-command of the Beltran Leyva Organization, a faction of the cartel now believed to be defunct.

He was taken into custody from Mexico's northwestern Sinaloa state, the sources said.

The US indictment marked the first time an alleged leader of the cartel was charged with "narco-terrorism and material support of terrorism," according to the Justice Department.

"The Sinaloa Cartel is a complex, dangerous terrorist organization and dismantling them demands a novel, powerful legal response," Attorney General Pam Bondi said at the time.

"Their days of brutalising the American people without consequence are over — we will seek life in prison for these terrorists."

US President Donald Trump's administration has conducted strikes on alleged drug boats in the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean, killing more than 100 people.

Trump has demanded Mexico increase its efforts to combat drug trafficking, threatening tariffs on its exports if more is not done.—AFP

UK to analyse black box from crash that killed Libyan general

TRIPOLI: Libya said on Thursday that Britain had agreed to analyse the black box from a plane crash in Turkey on Dec 23 that killed a Libyan military delegation, including its army chief.

General Mohammed al-Haddad and four aides died after a visit to Ankara, with Turkish officials saying an electrical failure caused their Falcon 50 jet to crash shortly after takeoff.

Three crew members, two of them French, were also killed. The aircraft's black box flight recorder was found on farmland near the crash site.

"We coordinated directly with Britain for the analysis" of the black box, Mohamed al-Chahoubi, transport minister in the Government of National Unity (GNU), said at a press conference in Tripoli.

He said a request for the analysis was "made to Germany, which demanded France's assistance" to examine the aircraft's flight recorders.

"However, the Chicago Convention stipulates that the country analysing the black box must be neutral," he said.

"Since France is a manufacturer of the aircraft and the crew was French, it is not qualified to participate. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, was accepted by Libya and Turkey."—AFP

Bulgaria adopts euro, nearly 20 years after joining EU

At city markets, stalls now display prices in both levs and euros

SOFIA: Bulgaria on Thursday became the 21st country to switch to the euro, a milestone met with both cheers and fears, nearly 20 years after the Balkan nation joined the European Union.

At midnight, Bulgaria gave up the lev, in use since the late 19th century, and Bulgarian euro coins were projected onto the central bank's building.

"I warmly welcome Bulgaria to the euro family," said Christine Lagarde, president of the European Central Bank, calling the euro a "powerful symbol" of "shared values and collective strength".

"Great! It works!" exclaimed Dimitar, a 43-year-old man after withdrawing 100 euros from an automated teller machine shortly after midnight.

Successive governments in the country of 6.4 million people have advocated joining the euro, hoping that it will boost the economy of the European Union's poorest member, reinforce ties to the West and protect against Russia's influence.

But Bulgarians have long been divided over the switch, with many worrying the introduction could usher in higher prices and add to the political instability rattling the country.

In a speech broadcast shortly before midnight, President Rumen Radev hailed it as the "final step" in Bulgaria's EU integration, as thousands of people braved sub-zero temperatures in the capital Sofia to celebrate the New Year.

Radev however voiced regret that Bulgarians had not been consulted by referendum on the adoption.

"This refusal was one of the dramatic symptoms of the deep divide between the political class and the people, confirmed by mass demonstrations across the country." Anti-corruption protests swept a conservative-led government from office in mid-December, leaving a country anxious about inflation on the verge of its eighth election in five years.

"People are afraid that prices will rise, while salaries will remain the same," a woman in her 40s who declined to give her name told AFP in Sofia.

At one of the city's largest markets, stalls displayed prices of everything from groceries to New Year's Eve essentials like sparklers in both levs and euros.

"The whole of Europe has managed with the euro, we'll manage too," retiree Vlad told AFP.

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said Wednesday that Bulgaria's move into the eurozone marked "an important milestone" for Bulgarians. "It will make travelling and living abroad easier, boost the transparency and competitiveness of markets, and facilitate trade," she said.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

WASHINGTON: New Year fireworks explode over the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.—AFP

VATICAN CITY: Pope Leo XIV presides over a Holy Mass as part of the New Year's celebrations at St. Peter's Basilica.—AFP

THE album will be BTS' first since the anthology *Proof*, which became South Korea's bestselling record of 2022.—AFP/file

K-pop stars BTS to release album in March ahead of world tour

SEOUL: K-pop megastars BTS will release a new album in March ahead of a world tour, the group announced on Thursday.

South Korea's biggest musical act has been on self-described hiatus since 2022 as its members undertook national military service required of all men under the age of 30.

All seven members were discharged last year, and the group announced a comeback for the spring of 2026.

They confirmed on Thursday that they would release an album on March 20 before heading on tour.

The exact date was revealed in handwritten letters sent to paid members of the official BTS fan group, and later confirmed by their label Big Hit Music.

"I have been waiting more earnestly than anyone else," group leader RM wrote in the letter.

No further details about the album or tour were given.

The album will be BTS's first since the anthology *Proof* which became South Korea's bestselling record of 2022.

Before their military service, BTS generated more than 5.5 trillion won ($3.8 billion) in South Korea per year.

The figure is equivalent to roughly 0.2 percent of the country's total GDP.

BTS has expanded beyond their home nation to become a global musical phenomenon in recent years.

They hold the record as the most-streamed group on Spotify, and became the first K-pop act to top both the Billboard 200 and the Billboard Artist 100 charts in the United States.—AFP

NONTHABURI (Thailand): People pray in coffins during a resurrection ceremony, where devotees lie in coffins for a symbolic death before being reborn, at the Wat Ta Kien Buddhist temple.—AFP

AMRITSAR: A Sikh devotee prays while taking a dip in the holy sarovar at the Golden Temple on New Year's Day.—AFP